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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Fifty-first session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 551st MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Friday, 6 October 2000, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. KHORRAM (Islamic Republic of Iran)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.40 a.m.

ADOPTION OF THE REPORT OF THE FIFTY-FIRST SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE (document without a symbol) (agenda item 11)

1. Mr. ALFELD (Rapporteur) thanked delegations, whose willingness to enter into dialogue and cooperate had made it possible to reach a consensus on the decisions and conclusions contained in the draft report. He drew attention to the decision relating to observer delegations' participation in meetings of the Standing Committee in 2000-2001, noting that four countries - Armenia, Georgia, Guatemala and Rwanda - had been added to the list in paragraph 31.

2. The report of the fifty-first session of the Executive Committee was adopted.

CLOSING STATEMENT BY THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

3. Mrs. OGATA (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) thanked delegations for their tributes to the UNHCR colleagues killed in West Timor and Guinea and said she had been encouraged by the fact that they had all stressed the need to strengthen security for all humanitarian workers. Although a wide range of subjects had been discussed, a number of common concerns had emerged, including the linkage between conflicts and refugees, the complex relationship between asylum, migrations and human trafficking and the need to act quickly when lives were at stake. She appreciated the fact that many delegations agreed with her on the need to strengthen and improve UNHCR's emergency preparedness and response capacity in increasingly complex humanitarian crises. Similarly, delegations' reactions to the global consultation process had been very positive and UNHCR had taken note of the many constructive suggestions made on the format and scope of the consultations, which should revitalize the international protection regime. She considered that the consultation process should be based on a well-defined agenda, concrete objectives and a specific timeframe.

4. With regard to solutions, there was a consensus that voluntary repatriation was the best solution for most refugees. It was therefore necessary to capitalize on the "windows of opportunity" now available for returns, as in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, and for peace, as in Burundi, the Horn of Africa and elsewhere. Yet voluntary repatriation was not the only durable solution and many delegations had emphasized the important role of resettlement within the overall strategy. Perhaps that signified a growing realization that unending refugee crises served no one's interests.

5. The discussions had highlighted concerns about the lack of security in refugee populated areas and a consensus had emerged on the need to protect not only refugees, but also humanitarian workers. Neither should local people be obliged to suffer as a result of the presence among refugees of armed groups or the perpetrators of violence. The situation in West Timor had clearly shown that failure to deal decisively with the causes of insecurity put refugees and the local population at serious risk. It was agreed that conflicts produced refugees, but refugee situations, when allowed to fester, could help ignite and even spread conflicts across

borders, as the situation in West Africa illustrated. Conflict prevention was the immediate priority, but, in the long-term, the international community must back up UNHCR's efforts with the sustained political, military and economic engagement needed to bring stability.

6. A number of delegations had urged UNHCR to stick to its mandates and focus on core activities. That was easier said than done. The search for sustainable solutions frequently depended on factors that fell well outside UNHCR's mandate and expertise. In addition to its operational activities, UNHCR had to play a catalytic role in mobilizing all the other actors, particularly in the areas of security, the rule of law, financing, reconstruction, development and economic revitalization.

7. With regard to funding issues, she said that many delegations had called on UNHCR to make greater efforts to prioritize its activities. However, the real needs of refugees placed limits on how far UNHCR could go in reallocating its budgets and reducing its programmes - and those limits had been reached. She was grateful to those delegations which had made new pledges of contributions, particularly as UNHCR was chronically underfunded. If it was able to make the funding of UNHCR's activities more stable and predictable, the international community would alleviate the heavy burden the upkeep of refugees imposed on host countries.

8. With regard to effectiveness, she said that efforts should be made to make the Executive Committee a more dynamic forum. The numerous statements made during the consideration of the annual theme had become very similar; one might have expected a variety of perspectives and lively exchanges, albeit on the same subject. She would nevertheless be advising her successor of the importance of the Executive Committee and its subsidiary bodies, which were the most important global forum for mobilizing interest in and support for refugees and UNHCR's work.

9. Lastly, she said that, when she had accepted the position of High Commissioner 10 years before, she had been conscious of the daunting challenges that lay ahead. She had done her best, but she could not have succeeded without the extraordinary support of Governments, the United Nations, international organizations and NGOs. She was sincerely grateful to them and hoped that they would offer the same support and encouragement to her successor.

10. The CHAIRMAN paid tribute to Mrs. Ogata for her admirable work at the helm of UNHCR and for her unwavering advocacy of the cause of refugees. He thanked delegations for the constructive approach they had taken throughout the session, which had thus taken place in an atmosphere of remarkable sincerity and friendliness. For his part, he undertook to work during his period of office towards two objectives he considered important, i.e. improving the dialogue between UNHCR and its partners (States, regional and international organizations and NGOs) and ensuring the safety of all humanitarian staff.

CLOSURE OF THE SESSION (agenda item 12)

11. After the customary exchange of courtesies, the CHAIRMAN declared the fifty-first session of the Executive Committee closed.

The meeting rose at 11.10 a.m.